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Opium and Empire: McCoy on Heroin in Southeast Asia

Alfred W. McCoy, with Cathleen B. Read and Leonard P. Adams II, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. xii, 464. $10.95.

by Peter Dale Scott

Syndicate administration of the saloon-with-entertainment business is equally smooth, a man on a theatrical publication told me.... "One man arrives and says he is from City Hall, and he is a partner, drawing down a hundred and a half a week" ... "But is the fellow who declares himself in really from City Hall or from the Syndicate?" I asked. "Well, he's known as a Syndicate fellow, but the police enforce what he says," the man said. "I don't know what the split is." "Maybe the Syndicate is just a front for the city government," I suggested, "instead of its being the other way around." And maybe, I have thought since, the city government is just a front for Colonel McCormick and for the railroads that don't want to be moved off the streets and for the landlords who don't care to lose the swollen rents from their hovels.... If no Syndicate existed it would be necessary to invent one, to blame it for the way things are."

—A. J. Liebling

More and more, as scholars search to understand the history of U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia, they are forced to study the largely submerged operations of crime. The tripartite symbiosis which A. J. Liebling a generation ago described in Chicago—between local government, the Syndicate, and less visible economic interests—operates with the same brutal efficiency in the Far East as well. There too the tightly-knit, ruthless bagmen and enforcers from narcotics and other vice operations become the indigenous local cadres for venal and demoralized regimes, which in turn are fronts for more powerful imperial and economic forces. Al McCoy has written a fascinating and exhaustive analysis of the interpenetration between crime and local government in Southeast Asia. But, as we shall see, he has less to say about U.S. influence behind the scenes, and as to economic interests he is largely silent.

In Southeast Asia as in Chicago, the roots of this tripartite symbiosis go back more than a century. Opium, illegal in China after 1729, was nonetheless a prime inducement to Western penetration in the nineteenth century, when its profits contributed to the Forbes and other great New England fortunes. [illegible] instrument in the demoralization of popular nationalism, and finally the cadres from narcotics traffic were directly incorporated by intelligence agencies (French, Chinese, Japanese and American) into factitious local "governments" as alternatives to indigenous revolutionary movements.

The great value of McCoy's timely and well-documented book is to have shown clearly the extent to which the strength and motivation of pro-Western governments since World War II in Vietnam and Laos have been a function of their involvement in narcotics traffic, both domestic and international, sanctioned and criminal. (McCoy's book was apparently completed before similar evidence linked the new Phnom Penh government to international heroin traffic, through a commando training camp organized by the CIA and headed by Lon Nol's brother Lon Non.)[1]

From his historical chapters one also derives a picture of the importance of Pacific Asia to the emergence of a world traffic for heroin. In the 1920s the flow of heroin was from Western countries to the Far East.[2] Today, as if by Hegelian vengeance, the flow has reversed itself, reaching beyond the ethnic ghettoes of America's inner cities into the wealthy suburbs as well.

The outlawing of narcotics in these countries has not improved matters. On the contrary, profits once earmarked for public revenues now go to private traffickers and for protection, while the criminal corruption of local police, military, and intelligence officials has become systemic. Thus not only the traffic but the urban social structure is progressively delegalized as the prospects for non-criminal enterprise and administration decline. McCoy's book suggests strongly that, in Indochina as in China before it, the export of heroin to world markets will end only with colonialism itself.

In this last phase of delegalized colonial politics, U.S. intelligence agencies have actively exploited the profits and tightly-knit controls of the drug traffic. At first this intelligence-crime alliance may have been tactical only, as in McCoy's opening chapters on the 1940s, when OSS and CIA picked up anticommunist allies from the Mafia in Sicily and the Corsican Guerini gang in Marseille. Later, in Asia, the U.S. and/or its local puppets have depended almost without break on this alliance (with its own trade links to the Mafia and the Corsicans of Marseille).

In Southeast Asia narcotics and related forms of organized vice (gambling, lotteries, alcohol, all oriented towards the important overseas Chinese communities in [illegible] have been [illegible] prominent, even central, in governmental revenues and influence. Take for example

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